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Enhancing Moral and Spiritual Development in Early Childhood Education Through the Ponakawan Philosophy

Nurul Mubin[1], Sri Haryanto[2]✉, Robingun suyud the Syam[3], I Putu Agus Dharma Hita[4]
Postgraduate Al-Qur'an Science, Universitas Wonosobo, Indonesia(1)
Early Childhood Islamic Education, Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an, Indonesia(2)
Islamic Religious Education, Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an, Indonesia(3)
Physical Education, Health and Recreation, Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, Indonesia(4)
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Abstract
This study explores the integration of Ponakawan philosophy into early childhood education curricula. The research addresses a critical gap in the literature, where traditional Javanese philosophical concepts have not been systematically examined for their pedagogical value in modern educational settings. By analyzing 36 sources of literature using a qualitative interpretive approach, this study provides a philosophical and educational perspective on how Ponakawan values can contribute to character development in young learners. The methodology involves a systematic literature review combined with a thematic analysis to synthesize key philosophical principles and their potential applications in early childhood education. The findings highlight that Ponakawan philosophy, emphasizing wisdom, humility, and social harmony, aligns with contemporary educational frameworks that promote holistic child development. However, the study also identifies challenges in adapting traditional wisdom into structured curricula. This research contributes to the field by bridging indigenous knowledge with contemporary pedagogy, offering practical insights for curriculum developers and educators. The study's implications suggest that integrating Ponakawan philosophy into PAUD curricula can enrich children's moral and social development. Future research should explore empirical applications and the effectiveness of this approach in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: *Meaning of Life; Early Childhood Education; Ponakawan Philosophy; Character Development*

✉ Corresponding author: Nurul Mubin
Email Address: sriharyanto@unsiq.ac.id (Wonosobo, Indonesia)
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Introduction

Wayang is a unique and deeply rooted traditional art form in Indonesia, particularly among the Javanese. Wayang performances are commonly held during special occasions such as birth ceremonies, circumcisions, weddings, and traditional purification rituals. While wayang serves as entertainment, it also carries profound spiritual, philosophical, and educational values. Historically, it has been a medium for conveying moral teachings and

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religious messages, shaping cultural identity and ethical perspectives among the Javanese people.

The origins of wayang can be traced back to Javanese ancestral beliefs that depict the duality of good and evil forces (Kresna, 2012). Around 1500 BC, wayang was performed as part of religious ceremonies with animistic elements. Over time, as Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam spread to Java, wayang adapted its narratives to incorporate religious teachings. The 16th century marked a significant transformation when Islamic scholars, particularly the Wali Songo, utilized wayang as a tool for religious dissemination. Sunan Gunung Jati and Sunan Kalijaga played pivotal roles in modifying wayang kulit to align with Islamic values, integrating new characters such as the four Punakawan figures: Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong (Hadiprashadha, 2019).

The Punakawan characters hold a special place in Javanese philosophical and pedagogical traditions. Semar, as the central figure, embodies wisdom, humility, and divine guidance within the Manunggaling Kawula Gusti concept, portraying him as a "true teacher" for humanity (Hermawan, 2012). The Gara-gara scene, where the Punakawan figures make their appearance, serves not only as comic relief but also as a platform for delivering profound moral lessons (Wurianto, 2018). The structured order of their entrance—Semar first, followed by Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong—suggests an intentional didactic framework that warrants exploration in the context of early childhood education.

Despite the extensive literature on wayang and Punakawan figures, existing studies have primarily focused on their role in cultural, artistic, and religious contexts. For example, Astuti (2019) developed Punakawan e-comic learning media, while Eddy Saputra (2021) examined their contribution to Islamic education. Other studies, such as those by Ranuhandoko & Sidhartani (2019) and Rosa (2019), analyzed character values and artistic representations of Punakawan. Meanwhile, Nasif & Wilujeng (2018) explored wayang as a medium for Islamic propagation, and Meralda (2021) investigated the application of Punakawan values in architectural design. However, there remains a significant research gap concerning the application of Ponakawan philosophy in early childhood education (PAUD). No existing studies have explored how the values embodied in these characters—particularly Semar—can be systematically integrated into PAUD curricula to foster moral and ethical development in young learners.

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing how Ponakawan philosophy, particularly Semar's values, can contribute to early childhood education. By examining the intersection between Javanese philosophical traditions and modern pedagogical approaches, this research seeks to propose a framework for incorporating Ponakawan values into character education for young learners. Understanding these philosophical foundations can contribute to a more holistic and culturally relevant approach to PAUD curriculum development.

Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to analyze the philosophical values of Ponakawan in relation to early childhood education. The primary objective is to examine the relevance of Ponakawan's philosophical principles in optimizing moral and ethical development in young learners (Sukardi, 2021).

The data collection process involves gathering information from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, dissertations, and conference proceedings that discuss Ponakawan philosophy, character education, and early childhood education. The selection criteria for literature include: 1) Relevance: Studies must explicitly address Ponakawan philosophy, wayang-based character education, or indigenous pedagogical approaches. 2) Publication Credibility: Sources are selected from indexed and reputable academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar). 3) Timeframe: Preference is given to recent studies (last 10 years), with classic references on wayang philosophy also considered. 4) Contextual Fit: Literature must connect theoretical frameworks with practical applications in early childhood education.

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The selected literature is analyzed using a qualitative philosophical approach with an emphasis on: 1) Hermeneutic analysis, which interprets the meaning and contextual relevance of Ponakawan values in contemporary education. 2) Content analysis, where key themes related to moral and ethical education in PAUD are extracted and categorized. 3) Comparative analysis, which contrasts traditional Javanese pedagogical insights with modern character education frameworks.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings: 1) Triangulation is employed by cross-referencing multiple sources to confirm the consistency of identified themes. 2) Expert validation is conducted by engaging academics in philosophy, education, and Javanese culture to review the interpretations. 3) Reproducibility check is ensured by documenting the selection process and coding framework for theme identification.

Finally, the findings are synthesized to highlight the philosophical contributions of Ponakawan to PAUD curricula and offer recommendations for integrating these values into contemporary early childhood education (Sugiyono, 2021).

Result and Discussion

The integration of Ponakawan philosophy into early childhood education (PAUD) can be critically examined by comparing its values with modern educational theories. In Montessori education, for instance, the emphasis on independent learning, respect, and self-discipline aligns with the values of Semar, who embodies wisdom and guidance without coercion. Similarly, in Erikson's psychosocial development theory, the stage of initiative vs. guilt (ages 3-5) emphasizes the importance of social interactions and moral understanding, which can be reinforced through Ponakawan storytelling and role-playing. The humor and wisdom of Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong encourage children to navigate social situations with critical thinking and emotional intelligence, mirroring Erikson's emphasis on identity formation and trust-building.

Beyond theoretical alignment, the practical application of Ponakawan values in PAUD teaching methods requires a structured pedagogical approach. One potential method is storytelling (cerita rakyat), where educators narrate Ponakawan tales that demonstrate honesty, humility, and resilience. Additionally, role-playing activities can help children embody the different characteristics of Ponakawan figures, fostering empathy, cooperation, and ethical decision-making. These methods parallel modern experiential learning approaches, which emphasize active participation and contextual learning. By using drama-based learning, children can internalize moral lessons in an engaging and culturally relevant manner.

Despite its potential, the adaptation of Ponakawan philosophy into formal PAUD curricula presents several challenges. Traditional Javanese philosophy is deeply embedded in oral storytelling and symbolic representations, which may require significant adjustments to fit structured early childhood education standards. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical studies measuring the effectiveness of Ponakawan-based pedagogy in comparison to existing character education models. To bridge this gap, future research should explore experimental or qualitative case studies in PAUD classrooms, assessing the long-term impact on children's moral and social development.

Furthermore, cultural adaptation is another concern. While Ponakawan values resonate with Indonesian cultural identity, the implementation of these teachings in diverse educational settings requires contextual flexibility. Educators may need training in Javanese philosophical frameworks to ensure that the values are conveyed effectively without being misinterpreted. Additionally, in a rapidly globalizing world, there is a need to balance indigenous wisdom with contemporary educational paradigms, ensuring that children benefit from both culturally relevant teachings and globally recognized pedagogical approaches.

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Ponakawan as a Moral Foundation in Early Childhood Education

Ponakawan is an original creation of Indonesian poets and holds deep philosophical meaning in Javanese culture. The term Ponakawan comes from the words "*Puna*", meaning understanding, and "*Kawan*", meaning friend. Thus, Ponakawan can be interpreted as a friend who understands, a concept highly relevant to early childhood education, where moral and ethical guidance plays a crucial role in shaping young minds.

The character of Ponakawan first appeared in Javanese literary works, with Mpu Panuluh introducing figures such as Jurudyah, Punta, and Prasanta in *Gatotkacasraya*, which is derived from the Mahabharata (Wieringa, 2000). Over time, particularly during the Majapahit era, these characters evolved, giving rise to Semar, the most prominent Ponakawan figure. Semar was first introduced in the *Sudhamala* story, which depicted Shadewa, the youngest of the Pandavas, as the central character. The story symbolizes purification and wisdom, which are core elements in moral education (Muada, 2021).

Ponakawan and the Islamic Influence in Wayang

Although Ponakawan was first introduced in Hindu epics, its role evolved significantly during the spread of Islam in Java. As Islam gained influence in the region, Wali Songo—particularly Sunan Kalijaga—used wayang as a medium for Islamic teaching. To make Islamic values more accessible to the Javanese people, Sunan Kalijaga retained the Ponakawan characters but infused them with Islamic teachings and moral values. This transformation aligned wayang stories with Islamic ethics while maintaining Javanese cultural identity (Nokenstudio, 2019).

In this adaptation, Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong became spiritual guides, humorously imparting wisdom and moral lessons. Their role extended beyond mere comedic relief, becoming a means of social criticism and moral education. Semar, in particular, became a symbol of divine wisdom and justice, embodying Islamic teachings while maintaining Javanese philosophical values (Hermawan, 2012).

Figure 1. Ponakawan (Ayuna, 2017)

The Educational Value of Ponakawan in Early Childhood Development

The Ponakawan philosophy offers valuable lessons in character education for young children. Each figure embodies key moral values that can be integrated into early childhood learning:

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1. **Semar: Wisdom and Compassion**
   Semar represents humility, guidance, and kindness. His values can be introduced through storytelling and role-playing to teach empathy, respect, and self-control.
2. **Gareng: Resilience and Integrity**
   Once arrogant, Gareng was humbled by Semar. His physical imperfections symbolize perseverance and honesty (Hadiwijoyo, 2020). His story teaches children the value of learning from mistakes and staying truthful.
3. **Petruk: Creativity and Critical Thinking**
   Originally a mighty warrior, Petruk's transformation highlights wit and curiosity. His story encourages children to embrace creativity, intelligence, and problem-solving.
4. **Bagong: Playfulness and Equality**
   Cheerful and mischievous, Bagong challenges norms and values curiosity (Rizki, 2022). He teaches that play is vital in learning and that laughter can be a form of wisdom.

By incorporating these figures into early education, children can develop strong moral foundations in a fun and engaging way.

Ponakawan in Wayang Performances and Their Role in Education

The *Gara-gara* scene in wayang performances, where the Ponakawan appear, is a highlight for audiences. Beyond comedy, it conveys deep moral lessons, as the Ponakawan guide the main characters through ethical dilemmas. This mirrors storytelling in early childhood education, where lessons are woven into engaging narratives (Bernata, 2020).

The Ponakawan also reflect Javanese philosophical values that can be adapted into education: 1) **Manunggaling Kawula Gusti** (Unity of Human and Divine) → Encourages spiritual awareness and mindfulness. 2) **Laku Lampah** (Life's Journey) → Teaches children to learn from experiences and make ethical choices. 3) **Gotong Royong** (Mutual Cooperation) → Instills teamwork, respect, and collaboration.

Integrating these values into early education helps children develop character in a meaningful way.

Table 1. Names and Characteristics of Punakawan

No	Name	Other name	Characteristic features
1.	Semar	Sang Hyang Ismaya, Baranaya	Index finger pointing, Eyes narrowed, Body fat
2.	Gareng	Pancalpamor, Pegatwaja, Cakrawangsa, Pandhu Pragolamanik, Bambang Jati pitutur	Deformed feet, Deformed hands, Deformed eyes
3.	Petruk	Kiai Supatra, Kanthong bolong, Surajenggala, Kebodebleng, Dublajaya	Tall body, long dream, sharp nose, slim
4.	Bagong	Bawor, Cepot, Carub, Astrajingga, Antolgati, Pojok Kethokol	Body fat & round, Eyes wide, Lips thick / ble

Source (Bimbel Brilian, 2017)

Optimizing the Meaning of Life in Early Childhood Education through the Ponakawan Philosophy

Javanese culture is deeply rooted in values, norms, and life philosophies (Kasanova, 2018). Within this tradition, *wayang* is more than just a performing art—it is an educational tool that imparts moral lessons through storytelling. One of its most iconic character groups is the Ponakawan: Semar and his three children—Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong.

In *wayang* performances, the Ponakawan serve as mentors and spiritual guides, offering wisdom and humor to the knights they accompany. Their role aligns with early childhood education, where moral guidance and social interaction shape a child's understanding of life.

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The term *Ponakawan* comes from *pana* (understanding) and *kawan* (friend), signifying their role as wise companions rather than mere followers (Pangaribuan, 2021). Unlike the rigid and formal knights, the Ponakawan are engaging and humorous, making them a favorite among audiences.

Each character symbolizes key virtues: 1) **Semar** → Wisdom, 2) **Gareng** → Resilience, 3) **Petruk** → Creativity, 4) **Bagong** → Social awareness. Incorporating the Ponakawan philosophy into education helps children develop strong moral values through storytelling and character-driven lessons.

Table 2. Names and Attitudes of Punakawan

No	Nama	Attitude
1.	Semar	Humble, Honest, Loving others, Not arrogant
2.	Gareng	Not good at talking, Funny / homoris
3.	Petruk	Good at talking, Funny / humorous, Smart, Courageous
4.	Bagong	Likes to joke, play dumb, Simple, Patient, Innocent

Source (Bimbel Brilian, 2017)

Semar Philosophy in Early Childhood Education

Semar is one of the most revered figures in Javanese *wayang*, often seen as the embodiment of divine wisdom. Ancient texts describe him as Batara Ismaya, the elder brother of Batara Guru, the chief deity in Javanese mythology (Hermawan, 2012). He is accompanied by Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong—his symbolic "children," each representing key moral values.

In Javanese philosophy, Semar embodies *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* (the unity of humans and the Divine), making him a spiritual and moral guide. His simplicity, humility, and wisdom align with early childhood education, where character development is essential (Sulistiyani, 2020).

Semar’s Symbolic Role in Moral Education

Semar’s unique appearance—a male face with a female body—symbolizes the balance of wisdom and compassion. His wrinkles and childlike hair reflect both age and timeless knowledge, while his smiling lips and teary eyes represent life’s joys and sorrows (Kresna, 2012). These elements translate into key moral lessons: 1) **Guidance and Wisdom** → As a mentor, Semar mirrors the role of teachers and parents in nurturing children with patience and understanding. 2) **Self-Control and Discipline** → He represents mastery over the senses, aligning with the development of emotional regulation in early education. 3) **Flexibility and Adaptability** → Like *wayang*, which evolves with time, Semar teaches adaptability, reflecting how education adjusts to different generations (Rusdy, 2012). 4) **Social Responsibility and Empathy** → He bridges social classes, teaching children inclusivity, fairness, and empathy in their interactions.

Semar in Islamic and Ethical Teachings

Semar’s philosophy aligns with Islamic values of wisdom and self-discipline. Surah Al-Muzzammil [73]:6 emphasizes reflection and spiritual growth, mirroring Semar’s role as a moral guide. His presence in *Gara-gara* scenes symbolizes guidance in times of uncertainty—just as teachers and parents help children navigate ethical choices.

The song *Lir-ilir* by Sunan Kalijaga, often associated with *wayang*, reinforces the importance of faith and good deeds, reflecting Semar’s teachings. In early childhood education, these values can be taught through storytelling, role-playing, and interactive discussions (Nugraha & Ayundasari, 2021).

By incorporating Semar’s wisdom into learning, children can develop strong moral foundations in an engaging and meaningful way.

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Table 3. Symbolic Meaning of Semar

No	Activities/Gimics	Symbolic Meaning
1.	Right hand pointing up	*hablum min Allah:* monotheism for the recognition of the oneness of Allah
2.	Left hand behind	*hablum min an-Nas*: whatever human kindness should be hidden so as not to appear in awe of the good that is done
3.	Right hand up, left hand down	humans so that they are not selfish, greedy, forget themselves, but become a person who always shares and spreads goodness throughout the universe
4.	Has a ponytail like a child, but has an old face	to achieve the ideal degree of leader, one must have the clarity of thinking (like that of children) as well as the maturity of thinking (like that of parents).
5.	Her eyes looked like she was crying, but her lips showed a happy laugh	Description of the contents of life in the world. Everyone goes through sad moments and happy moments. Leaders must be able to turn people's sadness into a smile of happiness
6.	As if never knew the word sad	As a leader, the pain and sadness you feel, should never be shown to others.
7.	His presence was accompanied by gamelan	Gamelan music reminds us to always be grateful to remember the Creator
8.	The figure of Semar comes with Gareng, Bagong and Petruk	symbols of 4 (four) types of lust in humans, namely muthmainnah, lawwamah, sufiah, and ammarah lust. All of these desires naturally exist in every self
9.	The figure of a knight and a caring friend	The word is a promise as a form of self-character. Self-idealism that has never been pawned by material interests

Source (Nizar, 2019)

Semar's Role in Early Childhood Education

When Semar enters a *wayang* performance, his arrival is marked by the phrase: "*Mbergegeg ugeg ugeg, hmel-hmel, sak ndulit lasts forever.*" This means that continuous effort, no matter how small, leads to lasting benefits. In early childhood education, this reflects the idea that learning is a lifelong process, and perseverance is key to development (Hana & Yusuf, 2021).

Semar as a Symbol of Stability and Moral Guidance

The name *Semar* comes from the Arabic word *Ismar*, meaning "nail"—a symbol of strength and stability (Nugroho, 2020). Just as Semar provides guidance in *wayang*, Islam is seen as a moral anchor:

> "*Al Islami Ismaraddunya*" – "*Islam is the reinforcement that ensures the safety of the world.*" Semar's wisdom makes him an ideal role model for teaching children about ethics and inner peace. Like *wayang* knights who seek his advice, children need mentors—teachers, parents, and elders—to guide them toward moral integrity.

Semar's Leadership and Compassion in Education

Semar holds the title *Badranaya*, meaning "compassionate leader" (Siswanto, 2019). This reflects modern educational values, where teachers and mentors should lead with empathy and wisdom. His divine connection is even represented in calligraphy, with his body described as filled with the words of God (Warsito, 2019). This highlights the role of ethical education and mindfulness in a child's development.

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Semar and the Javanese Philosophy of Learning

Javanese philosophy emphasizes *kawruh sangkan paraning dumadi* (understanding the origin and purpose of life), which aligns with the moral teachings of the *Ha-Na-Ca-Ra-Ka* script. Some believe Semar himself created this script, reinforcing his role as a guide to knowledge and self-awareness (Ciptoprawiro, 2013; Timoer, 2014). In early childhood education, Semar's philosophy teaches children to: 1) **Strive for self-improvement** – Small efforts lead to lasting success. 2) **Seek wisdom and guidance** – Learn from mentors and role models. 3) **Practice compassion and humility** – Treat others with kindness and respect. 4) **Be mindful and reflective** – Develop moral awareness from a young age.

By integrating Semar's values into education, children can grow with strong character, resilience, and a deep sense of ethics.

Figure 2. Kaligrafi Semar (Kholidy, 2015)

Gareng, Semar's eldest child, carries deep philosophical meaning. His name, Nala Gareng, comes from the Arabic Naal Qariin, meaning "to make many friends," reflecting the Wali Songo's approach in spreading Islam by building relationships and guiding people to righteousness (Yuniawan & Marzuki, 2020). In early childhood education, Gareng represents friendship, patience, and perseverance—key values for developing social and emotional intelligence.

Gareng's distinct physical features hold symbolic lessons. His wrinkled forehead signifies wisdom, while his squinting eyes represent focus, teaching children to stay committed to their goals. His crooked right hand symbolizes humility and fairness, while his left hand, always pointing, signifies guidance—encouraging children to help others. His large belly represents patience, reminding children to be resilient and grateful. The kawung-patterned jarik reflects humility and connection to all people, while his lame leg teaches caution in decision-making (Pramudiyanto et al., 2018). These traits reinforce moral discipline, patience, and responsibility in a child's character development.

Gareng's story teaches that challenges do not limit success; rather, patience and resilience shape one's journey. His values can be integrated into early childhood education by emphasizing the importance of perseverance, encouraging careful decision-making, and promoting honesty and humility. Just as Gareng takes careful steps in wayang, children should learn to think before they act, understanding that true greatness lies in kindness and sincerity.

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Figure 3. Gareng – Gaya Surakarta (Anto, 2022)

Petruk, Semar's second son and Gareng's younger brother, represents joy, sincerity, and selflessness. His name comes from the Arabic *Fatruk*, meaning "leave anything but Allah," reflecting Sufi teachings on detachment from materialism and trust in divine guidance (Fattahul Alim, 2018). In early childhood education, Petruk symbolizes sincerity, optimism, and emotional intelligence—key traits for developing strong moral and social skills.

Petruk's tall, elongated figure, with a long nose, neck, arms, and legs, reflects his carefree and generous nature. His nickname, *Kanthong Bolong* (perforated bag), represents giving without expecting anything in return. Through his philosophy, children learn that everything is temporary, true happiness comes from making others happy, and sincerity means doing good without seeking rewards.

Petruk also teaches five key moral principles that align with early childhood character development. *Momong* (nurturing) encourages children to care for others, teaching responsibility and compassion. *Momot* (listening and keeping trust) helps children develop respect for others' feelings and the importance of being trustworthy. *Momor* (humility and emotional strength) teaches resilience, helping children accept criticism and learn from mistakes. *Mursid* (understanding and empathy) fosters emotional intelligence, promoting teamwork and kindness. *Murakabi* (benefiting others) instills generosity, encouraging children to help those in need. By embracing Petruk's values, children develop emotional resilience, kindness, and a sense of responsibility, shaping them into compassionate and thoughtful individuals.

Figure 4. Petruk (Yosefpedia, 2020)

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Bagong, the youngest son of Semar and brother to Gareng and Petruk, embodies rebellion—not against authority, but against evil and injustice. His name is believed to come from the Arabic *Baghaa*, meaning "to rebel," or *Baqa*', meaning "eternity," symbolizing the impermanence of worldly life and the eternal nature of the afterlife (Saputra, 2010). In early childhood education, Bagong represents critical thinking, honesty, self-awareness, and resilience—essential traits for building confidence and ethical decision-making skills.

Bagong's physical features reflect his philosophical values. His large, round eyes symbolize curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, while his thick lips represent directness and honesty. His round body shape emphasizes the balance of strengths and weaknesses, illustrating the imperfect yet real nature of humanity (Bernata, 2020). Unlike Petruk, who is strategic, Bagong is bold and outspoken, teaching children the importance of truthfulness, standing up for what is right, and thinking independently.

Through Bagong's character, children learn honesty by expressing their thoughts openly, critical thinking by analyzing different perspectives, and self-awareness by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. His resilience teaches them that failure is part of growth. Rather than an idealized figure, Bagong represents real human imperfection, showing that flaws are natural and learning from mistakes is a valuable part of life.

By incorporating Bagong's philosophy into early education, children develop confidence, moral integrity, and the ability to navigate challenges with courage and wisdom.

Figure 5. Bagong (Rizki, 2022)

The Punakawan philosophy embodies deep cultural and philosophical values, addressing fundamental aspects of human life: existence, effort, social position, interaction with the environment, and relationships with others (Wildan, 2018). In early childhood education, these principles align with moral development, character building, and social-emotional learning. Semar represents wisdom and guidance, while Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong symbolize human emotions, creativity, and initiative.

Historically, *wayang* was used by the Wali Songo, especially Sunan Kalijaga, to teach Islamic values without conflicting with religious teachings (Kiai Mustofa Bisri, 2021). Though rooted in Hindu epics, *wayang* stories convey Islamic principles such as sincerity, humility, justice, and devotion to God. The contrast between good and evil in *wayang* is evident—Astina (Duryudana's kingdom) represents tyranny, linked to *Ash-Syaithan* (Satan), while the Pandavas symbolize righteousness and faith (Zuraya, 2012). Even the term *dalang* (puppet master) comes from *dalla* (to show the right path), reinforcing *wayang* as a tool for ethical and spiritual guidance.

The Punakawan figures represent human struggles and virtues, making them effective in teaching children moral values. Semar embodies wisdom and ethical leadership, Gareng represents resilience and careful decision-making, Petruk symbolizes creativity and generosity, while Bagong teaches critical thinking and self-awareness (Ranuhandoko &

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Sidhartani, 2019). These characters help children understand patience, honesty, problem-solving, and the courage to question and stand for what is right.

Each Punakawan name is also linguistically linked to Islamic teachings (Wurianto, 2018). *Semar* comes from *Ismar* (nail), symbolizing stability and religious truth. *Gareng* is derived from *Naala Qariin* (gaining good friends), reinforcing the importance of strong moral companionship. *Petruk* originates from *Fatruki* (abandon everything except God), teaching detachment from materialism. *Bagong* comes from *Baghaa* (rebelling against evil), promoting the courage to fight wrongdoing. These elements form a guiding philosophy: "Syimar Khairan, Fatruki Bagho" – "Spread goodness, abandon wrongdoing."

This philosophy encapsulates the core mission of education—shaping individuals with integrity, kindness, and a commitment to righteousness. Through the Punakawan, children can learn to be wise, resilient, creative, and critical thinkers, preparing them to navigate life with strong moral values.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the Punakawan philosophy serves as a valuable moral and educational framework in early childhood education. Rooted in Sunan Kalijaga's wayang tradition, the roles and narratives of Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong reflect profound ethical and philosophical principles. These figures embody wisdom, humility, resilience, and social harmony, making them effective role models for character education in PAUD. By integrating Ponakawan values into learning processes, educators can instill fundamental virtues such as self-discipline, generosity, and critical thinking, shaping well-rounded individuals from an early age.

This study contributes to the development of culturally relevant character education in Indonesia, particularly by bridging indigenous Javanese wisdom with modern educational paradigms. One practical recommendation is the implementation of Ponakawan values through storytelling-based pedagogy. Educators can use traditional wayang narratives as learning materials, allowing children to explore moral lessons through interactive and engaging experiences. Additionally, role-playing activities based on Ponakawan personalities can be introduced in PAUD classrooms to enhance social-emotional learning. These strategies align with contemporary experiential and character-based learning approaches, providing a holistic model for ethical development in young learners.

While this study highlights the potential integration of Ponakawan philosophy in PAUD, further research is needed to empirically assess its effectiveness in character education. Future studies could explore experimental research in PAUD settings, measuring the impact of Ponakawan-based learning on children's moral and ethical development. Additionally, comparative studies could investigate how traditional character education models like Ponakawan align with or differ from global frameworks such as Montessori and Erikson's psychosocial development theory. Such research would provide stronger empirical evidence for policy recommendations, ensuring the sustainable adaptation of indigenous wisdom in modern education.

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